What Is Revisionist History?

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Mailbag

By Erin Bartram | August 8, 2019

It's another mailbag! Folks ask us questions about the wherefores and what-have-yous of history, we try to answer them. This one came from Twitter a while back.

What is revisionist history?

If you read history or engage with historians on social media, you may have seen the phrase "revisionist history" in replies or comments. Much of the time, this is meant as a criticism of the history being presented and the historians and organizations presenting it. But what does it mean? And is it a problem?

When used as a criticism in everyday conversation, "revisionist history" refers to conscious, intentional misstatements about things in the past, whether distant or recent. It can be used in the context of personal lives and relationships—the cause of an argument, for instance—or in political and cultural discussions. At the time I was writing this, for instance, it was being used in Twitter conversations about Tom Brady, Obama's 2008 campaign strategy, and the Iran nuclear deal. Unlike saying someone is being forgetful or getting confused about what happened, accusing them of practicing "revisionist history" is accusing them of being a bad actor—a liar—by playing fast and loose with the past.

In most cases, accusing a *historian* of practicing revisionist history is accusing them of framing a historical figure, event, or narrative in a distorted and dishonest way in order to advance a particular social or political agenda. They're accused of minimizing or even ignoring evidence that would disprove their argument—or prove the argument of those who disagree with them. Those invested in the term and its use often claim they are defending history from people who are trying to warp it or use it as a weapon.

Often these complaints boil down to the belief that the historical interpretation that an individual knows, whether commonly-held or niche, is the *correct* one, which means other interpretations offered by historians are incorrect. Those

historians, it follows, must be very bad at thinking, intentionally distorting the process and product of historical inquiry, or both.

But for some who use “revisionist history” as a pejorative, the idea that history involves inquiry and interpretation is the problem itself. They’ll argue that they’re just *looking* at the evidence, not interpreting or “spinning” it like academic historians. History, for them, is just What Happened, its meaning easily accessed and understood by looking at a set of True and Complete Facts that has been assembled without human intervention.

If such a history existed, someone trying to change it in this way *would* be doing something dishonest. But I’ve never met a historian who thinks about history—either the process or the product—in this way. It’s just not what we believe about the past or how and why we study it.

The problem, of course, is that the accusers in both of these situations are often doing exactly what they accuse historians of doing—ignoring evidence that complicates their preferred narrative or embracing a historical narrative that’s clearly based on the interpretation of evidence but declaring that it’s just What Happened—and therefore can’t be questioned.

None of this matters, or even makes sense, unless we talk about *why* people accuse historians of practicing revisionist history. So I’d like to add one more thing to the definition I offered earlier. To accuse historians of practicing revisionist history is to accuse them of making conscious, intentional misstatements about things in the past, whether distant or recent, *in order to make a point about how things are or should be in the present*. The criticism is that historians are being “political” or “presentist,” distorting our understanding of the past in order to distort our understanding of the present.

Consider the following situations where you often see accusations of revisionist history leveled against historians:

- A historian making the argument that slavery was the cause of the U.S. Civil War—or rejecting the argument that there were black Confederates
- A textbook that emphasizes the role of women and non-white people in significant historical change
- A museum exhibit that reassesses the behaviors and beliefs of Richard Nixon or chooses to consider the effects of the nuclear bomb when exhibiting the Enola Gay

- A history department that requires majors to take courses covering a broad range of time periods and geographic regions
- A book that considers the competing intentions and goals of those who wrote, revised, and ratified the U.S. Constitution—and those excluded from the process

It's not that historians are distorting the past to make a point about the present. The discomfort comes from the fact that historians are often disrupting or destroying connections people have *already* made between the past and the present, connections that may be based on no evidence at all, but that are an integral part of how they understand what the world is like, how it came to be that way, and what their place is in all of it.

Looking at the list above, it's easy to see how some people might feel that their present understanding—of their identity, of their community, of their nation—is threatened by new and unfamiliar historical arguments. If you're clinging to a particular narrative about the past because it's a small but important part of how you understand your place in the world, it can be easier to say this new narrative is distorted, and maliciously so, than to reconsider the old narrative. This is especially true when the new historical narrative, by considering more perspectives and new evidence and fresh angles, seems to be taking "your story" out of the center of the narrative, even just a little bit.

Now, here's the big reveal: historians do practice revisionist history, in a sense. They revise what they know and believe about the past. They do it all the time. It's kind of the whole point of the discipline. And it's a *good thing*. After all, would you rather historians never looked at new evidence? Or never used new tools and approaches to reconsider and reinterpret old evidence? Or never reevaluated the significance of old evidence in light of new evidence? Or never reconsidered questions that had been asked prior to the emergence of new evidence, tools, and approaches? Or never questioned things previous historians hadn't thought to question?

The questions and doubts that are part of accusations of "revisionist history" are very similar to the questions and doubts that historians express as part of our day-to-day work. What questions are worth asking? What evidence is necessary to answer those questions? Which perspectives should be considered? How and when does change happen, and who experiences it most acutely? These questions are part of how historians decide what to research and how, and also part of how we analyze and assess each other's work, formally and informally.

To revise means to look over something again; it's why students in the UK "revise" for exams. For historians *not* to revise in this spirit would be the height of arrogance, and yet there are times when we are too proud of our work, too defensive of our process, to listen to questions offered in good faith.

But when we're at our best, historians aren't afraid to revise—to look again—because we know that another look can only help, even if it muddles what we previously thought was clear. When done from a place of humility, rather than defensiveness, and its questions offered in good faith, revision is what drives historical inquiry. The danger is not in practicing revisionist history—it's in constructing individual and collective lives around historical frameworks too shaky to be looked at again.

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1. Like all of our mailbags, this answer is written for people who don't work in academic and public history. It is an attempt at a readable primer on a big, complex topic.
2. Honestly, if you think this is possible, write down what you think happened at dinner last night, make your significant other write down the same thing, and compare accounts.

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